

# THE CREATION OF THE SOUTH KOREAN MIDDLE CLASS

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MODERN KOREAN SOCIETY  
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# ANTHROPOLOGICAL APPROACH TO CLASS

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- Practice-oriented
  - The experience of similar socioeconomic conditions may well produce class among people
  - What is interesting, however, is the interaction between objective conditions and subjective experiences
    - How is class expressed through daily life? In housing, marriage strategies, education, or consumption patterns
  - Structural features of the economy and society may shape peoples' opportunities, but the *distinction* between classes is constructed and contested through peoples' symbolic actions
- Historically situated—class doesn't exist as such but (like culture) is *emergent* through consciousness and language shaped by past historical experience

# HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

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- In post-Korean War South Korea terms such as social class, revolution, labor, and radicalism were tabu, and people who used such terms risked being labeled “reds” (ppalgaengi)—these terms reappeared in political discourse in conjunction with the *minjung* movement that emerged in the 1980s
- The term “middle propertied stratum” (chungsanch’ŭng) emerged in this context as a neutral term opposed to *sŏmin* (the unpropertied, unprivileged)
- Constructing a new, modern “middle propertied stratum” was a state project—it was an aspirational category

# HOUSING AS A MARKER OF MIDDLE CLASS STATUS

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- The South Korean state from the 1970s promoted high-rise apartment complexes (*ap'at'ŭ tanji*) as modern living spaces for middle class families
  - New apartment complexes in newly developing areas marked physical and symbolic class boundaries between the middle class and others
  - Apartment living became the middle class ideal, and high-rise apartments greatly outranked small-scale apartments that were less modern and for the lower middle class
- Meanwhile squatter settlements (p'anjach'on, taldongne) were being razed, and their residents resettled on the outskirts of town (largely in Sŏngnam)
- Low-rise housing in older parts of Seoul began to be seen as too old-fashioned and dark to house the new modern families



# FAMILY AND GENDER RELATIONS IN URBAN KOREA

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- Androcentric nationalism called for men to be providers and protectors, and women to be homemakers and reproducers
  - For women there was the image of the "wise mother, good wife" (hyŏnmo yangch'ŏ) borrowed from Meiji Japan, in which women contributed to modernity by becoming hygienic, modern homemakers
- In the urban context, this called for men to have good jobs, and for their wives to be stay-at-home mothers
  - This is a process that Cho Haejoang termed "housewifcation" (chubuhwa)
  - This is an ideal that could be met by the chungsan ch'ŏng, and by unionized workers in large-scale industry, and was promoted in glossy magazines such as "Housewife's Life" (*Chubu Saenghwal*)
  - In lower class families all members had to work to pool their resources to survive

# THE GENDERED DIVISION OF LABOR IN URBAN FAMILIES

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- Inside/outside distinction still important
  - Women the “inside person” (an saram) and as the modern home-making person came to be fully in charge of consumption
  - Men worked long hours (60+ a week) and simply had no time to take charge of even the household budget in most cases
  - Women were in charge of *consumption* that creates the middle-class life-style, and thus controlled the budget in most cases (except of the husband had extraordinary financial knowledge)
    - Control of the budget included taking charge of apartment chŏnse and family investments
    - Thus most newspapers have a *chaet'aek'ŭ* (literally “wealth-tech”) section guiding women in investment
    - Women often joined *kye* (rotating credit societies), and invested in real estate

# KYE AND THE CHŎNSE SYSTEM

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- Kye are rotating credit societies in which people put money in a kitty at monthly meetings, and one person gets the kitty
  - Typically they have twenty slots, and one "buys" and particular slot to get the kitty
  - Early slots are discounted, while later slots are rewarded
  - These are informal arrangements that are not enforceable by law, so there is always the danger of losing your money
  - Housewives use these clubs to accumulate capital for school fees, real estate investment, etc.
- Chŏnse is the "key money" people put down in a lump sum in lieu of rent
  - It is typically 60-70% of the sales price of a place
  - The landlord invests the money, and pays it back at the end of the rental agreement



# HOUSEWIVES AND CAPITAL ACCUMULATION

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- A smart housewife can combine the system of rotating credit societies and key money to accumulate capital
  - Accumulate some capital, put it down as chōnse for an apartment, then accumulate some more, get your original investment back and put down more chōnse for a more expensive apartment until you have enough capital to buy
- For those with more capital real estate speculation is also possible
  - There is a lottery system for the right to buy apartments in new developments at a relatively cheap price (you have to pay before it is built, so the builder does not have to borrow money)
  - You can flip the apartment after you buy it to someone else even before it is built, or move in and flip it later
  - Affluent real estate speculators (poktōk puin) can do this on multiple properties at a time